

ART AND THE CONTEMPORARY HUMAN CONDITION

by

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. . . in art we are not dealing with a simply pleasant or useful
toy but . . . with an unfolding of truth.

Hegel

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow

Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,

You cannot say, or guess, for you know only

A heap of broken images . . .

T. S. Eliot

Color, disposed upon the two-dimensional surface is the
prime characteristic that distinguishes painting from
its sister arts.

Hegel

The awareness of the break in Western tradition is not to be equated with nihilism; on the contrary the contemporary concern leads to a more honest perception of the real world. A revolt against the hierarchy of values has taken place. William Barrett correctly observes, "Now the painter dispenses with objects altogether. The colored shape on his canvas is itself an absolute reality, perhaps more so than the imaginary scene, the great battle, which in a traditional canvas it might serve to depict. Thus we arrive at l'art brut (brute art), which seeks to abolish not only the iron clad distinction between sublime and banal but between the beautiful and ugly as well."¹

Is it thus possible in the future to have any sort of humanism in art that does not depend on the older notions of self, the outdated independent self? A humanism that must come to terms with our sense of anonymity of the self. Tovish, a sculptor, in 1968 stated, "Art used to be for the glory of God. I'd like art to aspire to something today. But what? Maybe survival. I'm tired of self-expression. There must be something beyond that. I want some grand project that will end up being anonymous. I'm thirsting after it."² There can remain a certain kind of humanism in spite of all of the dehumanizing and anti-romanticism, a humanism that is not anthropocentric.

Contemporary sensibilities and perceptions suggest a return to a primitive view of nature. Throwing off the mask of illusion reveals no longer a previously hidden order of systematic reasoning and meaning

¹William Barrett, Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy (London, 1964), p. 50.

²Grace Spruch, "Two Contributions to the Art and Science Muddle," Artforum, January, 1969, p. 29.

available to our experiences, but instead indicates randomness, chaos, and madness. The romantic movement was in part a reaction against the dehumanized view of the world provided by Newtonian science and Cartesian philosophy. The Newtonian world order saw a completely mechanical world, which held sway until the latter part of the nineteenth century, a system of bodies moving in space governed by unalterable laws of force. By excluding the individual human experience, and seemingly denying man's freedom, it created an alienation of the human spirit.

One element of the romantic affirmation of self was the cult of the hero, the faith in the possibility of a Napoleon, a Beethoven to transcend the limits of the human condition and gain mastery of one's own destiny. The new hero, Faustian, daemonic, followed the dictates of his own inner needs and sought to fulfill himself unrestrained by either laws of man or nature. This view is systematically expressed and indeed brought to its logical conclusion in the creation of the concept of the Nietzschean superman, who epitomizes the ultimate Romantic hero. The same theme is indeed found in Wagnerian operas, in which the hero overcomes the forces of fate and destiny.

Opposed to the heroic concept of life the increasing democratization of society, the "rise of the masses" and the increasing concern with social problems, changed the focus from the individual to concerns for the welfare of society as a whole. The socialization of the concept of freedom made the question of it a central political concern; the price of this was, however, the depersonalization of the romantic self and its replacement by the atomized political voter. The shift from an organic community to an atomized society, the forcible leveling of individual

differences raised already in the nineteenth century the question, central to twentieth century existentialism, of authenticity, asking the fundamental question of "who am I?". To what extent is the "I" unique?

After Hiroshima, Auschwitz and Viet-Nam man no longer wants to assert or seek himself out, but to transcend himself. Heroes have metamorphosed into anti-heroes and man now has become entirely contingent.

Instead of the nineteenth century idea of progress the twentieth century appears as entropy: evolution in reverse, suggesting a drift toward inertia. This view of man sees his life as a brief rebellion against randomness. Bronowski says that there are three notions of science accepted from Aristotle: the idea of order, the idea of cause and effect, and the idea of chance. The idea of order was based on the idea of cause and effect and chance was what could not be explained by cause and effect. Chance is no longer an exceptional effect in nature, but has become real and inherent in nature. The precise and exact Newtonian universe, governed by mechanical laws, has been replaced by one interpreted in terms of Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle. Cause and effect have given way to statements of probability, leading to the seemingly absurd idea that events are not interdependent and not governed by the principle of cause and effect. This is why Eugene Ionesco's plays are important in terms of behavior reduced to absurdity. In one of his essays he said, "My plays don't try to save the World." Since chance is inherent in nature it is more real than an a priori system of traditional thought. Western man no longer trusts the ideas of beauty and value but in addition finds it hard to surrender to nothingness as easily as, for example, Eastern man does through Zen.

In the past, the Christian world view of man with its acceptance of

God's laws and values, provided security and a sense of belonging to the world to man. With the decline of the acceptance of the biblical view of man came a loss in the ability to distinguish between values of good and evil. Yeats succinctly noted that:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosened upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned . . .³

The social and political organization of Europe before the French Revolution, with a rule by a "naturally superior" aristocracy provided a similar security for social values. This crisis in values has then not left the artist untouched. When the artist stopped painting for the Church and the aristocracy and began creating for an anonymous impersonal market he painted for "nobody". These conditions have created a unique burden for the artist. Deprived of an external frame of reference, the weight of failure to create valid works of art rests solely upon the artist. If he fails to achieve his goal the image of his own self is threatened and may eventually be destroyed. His perceptions could be inauthentic and therefore faulty. With the loss of the commanding power of myths artists have no longer available a set of common governing assumptions, but instead face anarchy. The estrangement of the artist from the public is reinforced by the artist being a by-product of the past and by his awareness of his times and the anxieties that pursue him through his situation. "Simple minds cling to the illusion of an orderly, purposeful, universe because it gives them a sense of security."⁴

³William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming", The Rinehart Book of Verse, Editor, Alan Swallow (New York, 1961), p. 322.

⁴John Cage, quoted in Marshall McLuhan, The Medium is the Massage (New York, 1967), p. 119.

According to Malraux one realizes that the autocracy of color almost always follows the decline of illusion.⁵ Today the two major elements emphasized in American painting are color and its attempts to transcend shape. Color, the most sensuous and least intellectual of the various pictorial means is presented in huge monolithic wall-like structures in Newman's work and the image enlargements of Held. These works are a reaction against the appearance of drawing and allow for the totality of paint. Newman rather than assigning color sparingly to counterpoint, uses color with physical impact in a total way. "Relationships" of color as used by Hofmann diminish to no preconceived semblance of order or system. Color may at times suggest systems as in Stella's monotonous stripes, but they are repeated until there is no apparent meaning or purpose. By making a statement about the object Stella has paradoxically extinguished the object which recedes toward absence. Even Olitski has tried to free color from the drawn shape by successive color sprayings until one color melts into another. Poon's color is as featureless as a gravel walk no longer submitting itself to the tyranny of the romantic self, but instead stands autonomously, allowing itself to be examined by man without concern for the past.

These works have been called boring, and nihilistic because the viewer had previously learned that all he should expect to see is located strictly within the specific object. The situation however is now more complex and expanded in possibilities. "Everyone is in the best seat."⁶

⁵ Andre Malraux, Museum without Walls (New York, 1967), p. 126.

⁶ John Cage, op. cit., p. 119.

Earlier in this century Cubism marked a break with the imitative view of an academic art. The object was allowed to symbolically resemble its model, but it did not allow the viewer to imagine that model--especially in a form resembling the picture. Paintings take on a sacred or an iconographic image when they do not rely on the senses, expression, or illusion but instead when the model and the object become identical. Cubism allowed the object to become the center of art, and presupposed a tension between the material picture plane and the overlay of illusory planes upon it. Within was an interplay of levels of reality and illusion. With a further decline of easel painting one also notes less involvement with the private fixed view of individualism. The signature of the artist's "touch" and the feeling of his presence as evidenced in Abstract Expressionism have been replaced by the non-manmade industrial look. Art then strives not to represent but to present. By reducing illusion to a minimum, painting begins to become an "object" which participates in space rather than imitating objects. It becomes imitation in a larger sense; detachment that is not indifference. It is not that the object is less important, it is less self-important. The artist dismisses the critical faculty to distinguish between reality and illusion. "One must be disinterested and accept that a sound is a sound, and man a man, give up illusion about ideas of order, expression of sentiment and all of the rest of our esthetic clap trap."⁷

The oddness of shape in Stella's work destroys the picture convention of rectangularity. Although it retains a gestalt outer form which allows the reading of surface to be immediate, there is no need for a frame around

⁷ibid, p. 119.

the painting. Since frames were used to link a work with its background in palaces or cathedrals of time past, the painting never had an autonomy as contemporary works do. The abandonment of this reference reveals the presence of a new vision--one no longer views imaginary spectacles. The convention that painting and things depicted are separated is destroyed. Art having become an integral artifact cancels its traditional function of alluding to something outside of itself. These antiskill attitudes--engagement with the actual, accent on the concrete, and directness of presence--act as personal statements in a totally impersonal framework. Color pigment and its "thingness" can certainly suggest substance. But color itself is essentially immaterial, non-containable, non-tactile in nature. It is an additive whereas qualities of scale, proportion, shape and mass are made physical. Reinhardt's black tones or neutral tones in his "black" paintings come so close to each other that they destroy the traditional boundaries between one shape and another and replace them with a barely perceptible continuum. Thus one is always finding a relationship or system only to be on the verge of losing it.

In the 1960's the large engaging size in painting is defined according to the viewer's height. Paintings larger than man acquire a monumental publicness about them and the viewer has to stand far enough away to perceive the whole. This size forces an involvement which smaller works cannot do, because the smaller object is more intimate and more possessable. In the internal part of Al Held's magnified fragments the surface incidents allow us to see what we have never seen before. Chance is also allowed free play upon the uncontrolled woven canvas. Viewers will even resort to touch-

ing Reinhardt's work because they cannot "see" but hope to feel the minimal change in forms.

The introduction of chance in related forms of expression also parallels the interest and concerns of today's painters. Burroughs writes on several pages, cuts them up and scrambles the scraps, and sets down the result in a fixed final form. In the "fold in" method Burroughs takes a page of text, his own or someone else's, and folds it length-wise down the middle. He combines it with another page of text, lining up the lines. The composite text is then read across, half of one text and half the other. This is a chance oriented form of literature.

In modern dance the movement across the stage with no particular purpose or place to go other than movement for the sake of movement, opposes the classical idea of beginning and end. In Cunningham's work space becomes a field of pure movement and dramatic "incidents" with a series of isolated actions. No one move is more important than another. "Movement is the message."⁸

The playwrights of the New American Theatre have abolished the hero with whom the audience can identify and replaced him with our universe of moral ambiguity and absurdity. The victim and his unheroic predicament are thereby placed deeply in touch with contemporary life.

Morris Engle's plotless films of everyday familiarity are made on a low budget. These noncommercial independent movie makers emphasize the routine patterns in life. When the camera was taken out of the studio in the early 50's scenes shot with a handheld camera and a non-professional cast have made the movie maker's private world the only one visible. The

⁸Donal Henahan, "Experiments in Movement," Saturday Evening Post, October 19, 1968, p. 40.

viewer must translate it back into his own world. This view of expressing only one's true feelings and hoping that everything will take care of itself does not work anymore. It presupposes a universal role that does not include the unique individual. The film artist is defining freedom but the form is one of self effacement.

John Cage's operation of chance, in his notation in music, is arrived at by the throwing of dice. Rather than a contrived superimposed structure he allows accidental sounds in his music. His "silent sonata" for piano 4'3" is in three movements. The division between movements comes when someone opens the piano lid at the start of each movement and closes it at the end. Otherwise the performer sits motionless and never touches a key. Cage said of his audience: "They didn't know how to listen, it was full of accidental sounds."⁹ His prepared piano, a grand piano converted into a percussion orchestra by attaching to it strings, nuts, bolts, screws, clothespins, bits of wood, rubber, plastics and glass, helps him to find the sounds he likes.¹⁰

This removal of self from the composition is meant to identify oneself with the ground of existence. Chance is a statement of affirmation and acceptance of chaos. It seems like a madness and negation of a pride of accomplishment in a culture which was nurtured on it.

When art has reached its "zero zone" it no longer has a fixed goal of distilling the standards of the past but provides a transformation of what is. The abandonment and renunciation of tradition of the past leaves only the exploration of the boundaries of perception. Because the accept-

⁹John Kobler, "Experiments in Sound," Saturday Evening Post, October 19, 1968, p. 92.

¹⁰ibid., p. 47.

ance of creative presence will become an absolute end in itself, shock value as a form will be less applicable to experience. Deification, or dependency on a system, has already become irrelevant. In the future there will have to be an expansion of this formal range, moving along with new perceptions of changing esthetics and/or human situations of the time. Original reordering of material within the spectrum of possibility certainly offers alternatives for exploration.

One can conclude that although the different areas of the world speak different cultural languages as well as possessing different traditions, in another sense we all speak the same language. The nineteenth century broke down the mask of illusion that man was the center of the world which in turn was his possession. The same is true of the masterpiece. No longer is art done for the Church or political institutions, but instead for "nobody". It is temporarily placed in apartments, in museums and reproduced in books. The latter provides a new vision of the past works in blown up detailed fragments. Since the white of the page excludes the linking frames it helps visually to modernize the past and becomes an equalizing factor in all works--African "primitive", western and eastern arts. The sphere of reference of art is the "museum without walls of all."¹¹ As the museum and the recognition of the heroic romantic self were an affirmation of the personal, expressing nineteenth century certainty, the museum without walls and the anonymous self are an interrogation fitting the twentieth century human condition.

¹¹Andre Malraux, op. cit., p. 231.

People had and will have similar desires, frustrations, and gratifications, but their intellectual attitudes have and will change and so will the art forms. Each particular culture must find its own forms and must evaluate the creative process in a manner appropriate to these forms themselves.

PRESENTATION OF THE THESIS ART OBJECTS

PLATE II

Untitled

(acrylic on canvas, 61" x 69")

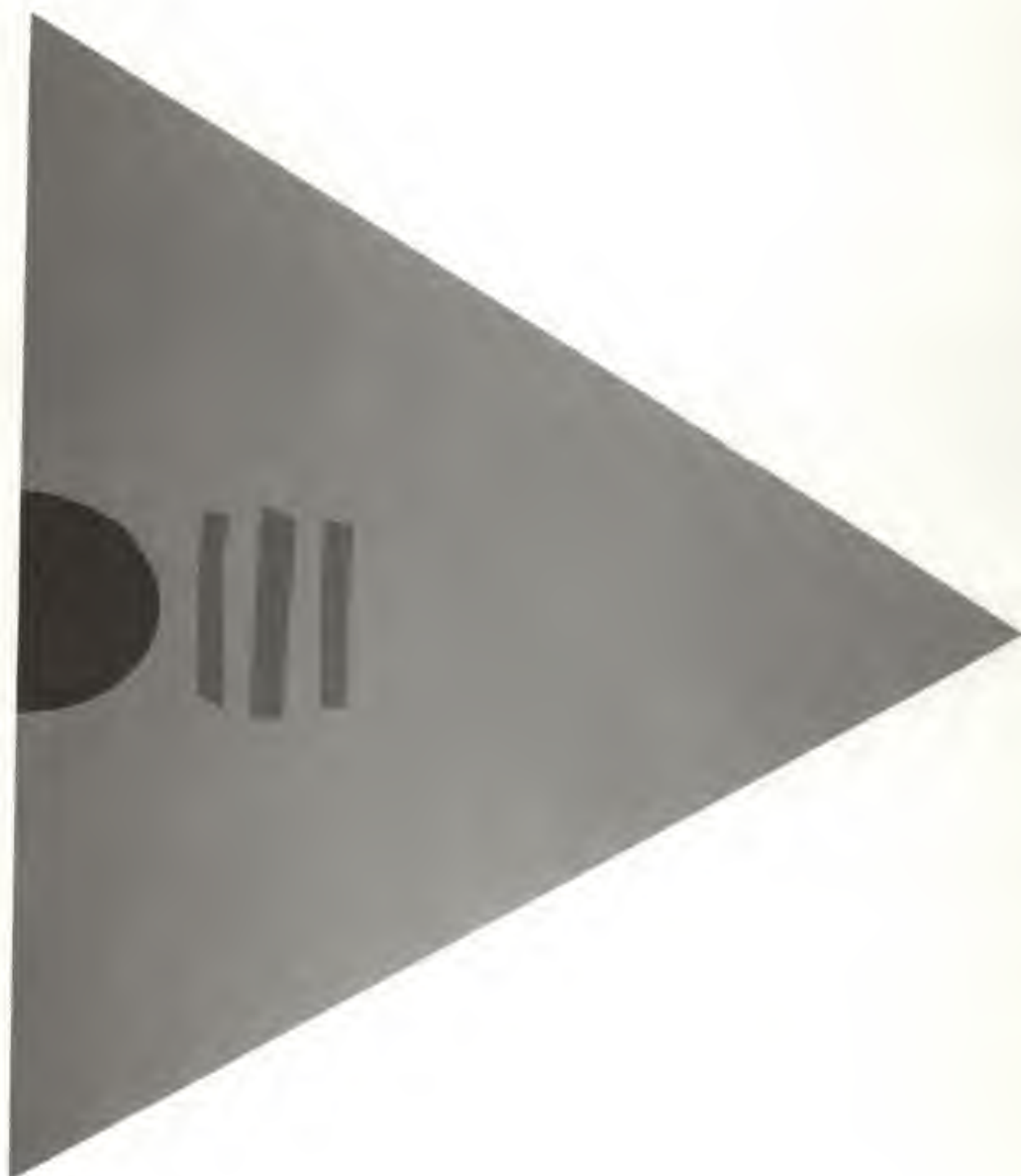


PLATE III

Untitled

(acrylic on canvas, 56" x 56")



PLATE IV

Untitled

(acrylic on canvas 64")



PLATE V

Untitled

(acrylic on canvas, 31" x 72")



PLATE VI

Untitled

(acrylic on canvas, 72")



PLATE VII

Untitled

(acrylic on canvas, 56" x 84")



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The written portion of the thesis treats the essential uniqueness of modern art, a uniqueness which radically differentiates it from the art of past periods. Most art works of the past may meaningfully be analyzed in terms of the balance between the use of tradition and originality. A fundamental element of modern art is its conscious rejection of tradition, its self-conscious desire to be avant-garde and explicitly attempt to reject the past. Contemporary art in contrast to previous periods, seeks to place itself outside the historical development of art, and seeks, successfully at times, unsuccessfully at others, to deny the validity and relevance of the inherited art traditions.

The foundation of twentieth century art is a radically different perception of the nature of self--set off against a medieval religious view of man, the seventeenth and eighteenth century rational definition of man, and the nineteenth century heroic and romantic concept of man--and provides a view of self that emphasizes modern man's anonymity, alienation, and existential condition of despair.

Contemporary art strikingly expresses in its particular mode similar or identical tendencies to those appearing in contemporary science, mathematics, music, literature and philosophy; however, it is not inferred that the artist deliberately seeks to parallel developments in science or other areas of culture.

Art of the present has been determined by the changed social conditions of art, defined by the fact that neither Church nor aristocracy exercise the role of patrons of art that they did in earlier centuries; instead the artist "produces" for an anonymous market.